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Domenico Losurdo in China: An Insight into the State of Marxist Education and the CPC

Roland Boer

In the northern hemisphere's autumn of 2019, I was asked to offer a seminar on a leading Western Marxist philosopher. I quickly chose Domenico Losurdo, since he is clearly one of the most insightful European Marxists who has the potential to contribute constructively to debates in China. Two of Losurdo's books have been translated into Chinese, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* and *Hegel and the Freedom of the Moderns*, and there is growing interest in his work.

But let me step back for a moment and set the context, which is somewhat uncommon for a foreigner. The seminar took place in the School of Marxism Studies at Dalian University of Technology (DUT). The school (perhaps better translated as an Institute) had recently been designated a "key centre" (*zhongdian*) for Marxist studies, particularly due to its pioneering of Marxist ethical education. As a result, it has a mandate to double its teaching and research staff, with a sizable increase in student enrolments already evident. Further, due to the education reforms instituted by Hu Jintao and implemented by Xi Jinping, Marxism is not merely a discipline in its own right, but the over-arching framework for all academic disciplines. This means that an institute such as the one in DUT is the nerve centre of the whole university, seen by many as a place with significant energy and spirit. It should be no surprise that institutes like this attract many of the best students.

What was I doing there? Given the drive to engage internationally, to tell China's story well in all parts of the world, and to undertake constructive dialogue with foreign scholars, I had been invited to take up a full position at the School of Marxism Studies. To my knowledge, I was the first foreigner to do so in such a school anywhere in a Chinese University. In light of this precedent, a more intense process was

undertaken, with an interview, formal lecture before the university's top leaders and party secretaries, and initial work to test my mettle, academic rigour and – of course – political positions. On the last item, it helped that I am a member of the Communist Party of Australia, which follows a Marxist-Leninist line.

Structure of the seminar

One aspect of my work is to lead a seminar for teaching staff and doctoral students. In total, the seminar was to cover 16 hours, in four solid blocks. After some experience in China (I have worked elsewhere for six years), my preferred approach is to produce detailed PowerPoint material, which serves as the background for discussion and debate. The PowerPoint is bilingual, with both English and Chinese text. After five years of studying Chinese daily – a long and arduous process – I can now manage the language reasonably well, so the seminar was conducted in both languages. This situation enabled us to discuss core questions, the translations of key terms, and especially the problems of such translation.

Due to my earlier training in Western Classics, I find that the best approach is to study the texts in question in careful detail. Everyone present had copies of the Chinese and English versions of the two books by Losurdo, one on liberalism and the other on Hegel.¹ They are somewhat long and detailed books, with the former clearly polemical and the latter constructive criticism. Both provided good insights into Losurdo's method and the nature of his arguments. But I had to choose: what would I emphasise?²

One obvious aspect is Losurdo's sustained critique of Western European traditions that have been detrimental and destructive. Given the focus of the first book, this entailed identifying the core contradiction of liberalism: it is based on a systemic unfreedom for those not deemed to be worthy of freedom. A second feature that runs through Losurdo's work is a recovery of the lost potential of dialectical

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1. The history of publication of these books is a little intriguing. *Liberalism: A Counter-History* was first published in Italian (2005) and then in English (2011) and Chinese (2014) translations. By contrast, *Hegel and the Freedom of the Moderns* first appeared in English (2004) in that form, being a compilation from a number of Italian sources (Losurdo has written extensively on Hegel). The Chinese translation (2008c) followed and then the Italian version (2012b).
 2. Useful background material, overviews and further developments can be found in the work of Stefano Azzarà (2007, 2011a, 2011b, 2019), and an interview in Chinese by Zhang Shuangli and Ni Yisi (2017).

and historical materialism. Not only does this require a reconsideration of Kant, Hegel and Gramsci, but also an emphasis on what has often been missed in the work of Marx and Engels. A good example is class struggle, which is too quickly restricted to the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Not so, argues Losurdo (2013: 9–57; 2016: 7–52), for Marx and Engels also identify the anti-colonial struggles of national liberation as a species of class struggle – think of their writings on Ireland, Poland, India and China. Indeed, in any struggle the class alignments constantly shift, whether in the French Revolutions, the revolutions of 1848, or in struggles for national liberation.

For me and for Chinese scholars and students, the most significant feature of Losurdo's work is that he was vitally interested in the developments of Marxism after a successful communist revolution, or what may be called the time "after October." One finds this emphasis in most of his works at some point, but a specific number are devoted primarily to these developments (Giacomini and Losurdo 1997; Losurdo 2008a, 2012a, 2000, 2003). Why is this concern so important? Too often one finds that many "Western" or at least non-Chinese Marxists are interested in the work of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao as it leads up to a communist revolution, from the perspective of "before October." After this moment, there is relatively little interest in the actual development of Marxist theory and practice. Instead, what happens during the construction of socialism is often cast as a "betrayal narrative" – at some point, it is felt, the revolutionary impulse is betrayed (Boer 2013: 6–8). This narrative has strong overlays of religious narratives concerning a "Fall" and expulsion from paradise. However, as Lenin and Mao said repeatedly, preparing for a revolution and actually gaining power is relatively easy; far, far more complicated is the long and arduous task of constructing socialism. New problems arise and new solutions are sought, solutions that cannot be found by simple "book worship" of the classics. By now it should be obvious that such a perspective of "before October" concerns not merely the favoured content for some Western Marxists, but a whole frame of thinking, a way of seeing the tradition that unfortunately dismisses too readily the significant achievements gained in the face of at times great difficulties.

Not so Losurdo, for his whole framework was what may be called "after October," after the proletarian revolution. This wholesale perspective influenced his close engagements with the European tradition of philosophy (especially Hegel), with Marx and Engels, with Gramsci, and of course with the Russian and Chinese processes of constructing socialism. Not only did it enable him to develop significant insights

into these situations, all the way from formations of governance through to the necessity of the Reform and Opening Up, but also to begin an effort to rework the Marxist-Leninist tradition so that it did not fall into the myopic trap of Western Marxism yet again (Losurdo 2000, 2008b, 2017).³

These background concerns shaped the nature of the seminars as they unfolded. The topics on which I focused were drawn from long and detailed works, although they did seek to identify the core issues of relevance in China today. However, I did not set out to speak for hours on end, for we were to discuss and debate the material together. Often, we would stop to discuss key terms; often, we would pause at a key sentence and talk about it for some minutes; often, people would go home, think and read further, and ask more questions at the next seminar. The detailed presentations were distributed widely to others in the school who were not able to attend.

Unfreedom at the Heart of Freedom: The Paradox of Liberalism

The first number of seminars focused on *Liberalism: A Counter History*. Losurdo (2011: 248; 2014: 271)⁴ defines liberalism as “a community of the free and its dictatorship over peoples unworthy of liberty.” This perspective is perhaps captured best by the words of John Calhoun (1782–1850), erstwhile Senator and Vice-President of the United States:

“In fact, the defence of human liberty against the aggressions of despotic power had always been most efficient in States where domestic slavery was found to prevail.” Within the Union, it was the South that had “constantly inclined most strongly to the side of liberty, and been the first to see and first to resist the encroachments of power” (Calhoun 1992: 468, 473; quoted in Losurdo 2011: 62; 2014: 68).

This was the key paradox: in the name of defence against despotic power, whether external or internal, the champions of liberalism exercise precisely such a despotism against the many they deem to be unworthy of liberty. As Calhoun points out, it is only with the unfree constantly present that a free person like himself values freedom all the more highly. The seminar explored this paradox in a number of

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3. Although this was not our concern in the seminars, one would expect that a few from this tradition would be offended by Losurdo’s characterisation (Broder 2017), although their opinions have thus far appeared mostly online in Italian and German.
 4. Since the readership of this article may include Chinese speakers, I provide – where necessary – citations to the Chinese translations.

ways. It began with the international scene, focusing on the three countries where liberalism first flourished, namely, the Netherlands, The United Kingdom and the United States. The next step was to move to national situations, in order to ask exactly what “liberal” and “liberalism” mean according to its proponents. It would turn out to be a core feature of bourgeois class consciousness. The third step was to examine the constantly shifting boundaries of the free and the unfree, for the internal contradiction had to be managed in some way. The outcome is what Losurdo calls the globalised liberal “master race,” or “*Herrenvolk* democracy.”

Background

Before some further detail on each of these items, with a focus on points of discussion, let me make a number of general observations. To begin with, a significant feature of courses and research, especially those concerned with theoretical and political education (core courses for all students), is the history and nature of liberalism. For example, the branch library at the School of Marxism Studies has a significant collection of translated works concerning liberalism. So most of the seminar participants were familiar with the general framework. That they found Losurdo’s insight refreshing would be an understatement. This leads me to the second point: as Robert Ware (2013: 140) has pointed out, Marxism functions as the dominant worldview and framework in China, in a manner analogous to the function of (neo-)liberalism in countries influenced by the Western tradition.⁵ This means that liberalism is quite alien to Chinese culture and Chinese Marxism. They seek to understand it, as a key feature of Western societies, but they are not enthused by it. For example, not so long ago it was the case that some thought the United States was a land of “freedom” – the tireless propaganda from that corner of the world had some influence for a while. But when they visited the United States, for a shorter or longer period, they realised soon enough that the image propagated at all levels, from politicians to the “Hollywood industry,” was an empty one.

Third, the seminar took place while the violent riots – with significant foreign funding and organisation – in Hong Kong were underway (2019), and had been so for a few months. By then, the riots were petering out as the rule of law was being enforced. There was widespread

5. I would add that Marxism is, especially now with Xi Jinping at the helm, the core driver of China’s economic, social and international path of development. In this light, some of Ware’s reflections from a decade or so ago seem quite dated.

coverage of the riots in the Chinese media and much discussion on Chinese social media. They were fully aware of the double-standards of a few countries, which sought to cast the riots as those of “freedom and democracy,” but one feature stood out. An outcome of the riots is the process of a deeper assessment of the underlying causes, apart from foreign interference. These included analysis of the socio-economic problems of Hong Kong’s capitalist system, with vast disparities between rich and poor, as well as calls to revise the curriculum of “Liberal Studies” in Hong Kong’s high schools. These were found to promote the liberal ideals that Losurdo unmercifully reveals in his study, with the attendant racism, class consciousness and anti-communist features. Needless to say, the curriculum was distinctly anti-Chinese. But with the terrorism of the few rioters against the many of Hong Kong’s 7 million citizens, the internal paradox of liberalism was clear to see. In other words, in the name of “freedom” from a perceived external despotism (the Chinese mainland), the instigators of the riots excluded the many in Hong Kong itself. That they vainly sought to return to colonial dependence on the UK, or called on Donald Trump to “save Hong Kong” made this paradox very clear.

Unearthing the Paradox

To unearth the paradox, we began with three quotations, each clear statements of liberalism:

God made man a free agent, and at liberty to do ill or well (Grotius [1627] 2012: I.19).

Man has a natural freedom ... since all that share in the same common nature, faculties, and powers, are in nature equal, and ought to partake in the same common rights and privileges (Locke [1691] 2003: I.67).

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (*Declaration of Independence of the United States of America*).

But there is a macroscopic problem with each of these statements: they come from the three countries that most vigorously promoted the slave trade. Was this simply a historical anomaly, extraneous to the content of these statements of liberty? A few thought so, especially in relation to Grotius, who also observes that the exercise of freedom means that it is “lawful for any man to engage himself as a slave to whom he pleases” (Grotius [1625] 2005: III.7.1). In regard to the many who are incapable of freedom, Grotius refers to Aristotle, for whom “certain

persons are by nature slaves, not because God did not create man as a free being, but because there are some individuals whose character is such that it is expedient for them to be governed by another's sovereign will rather than by their own" (Grotius [1868] 2006: 95; quoted in Losurdo 2011: 23; 2014: 26).

When we came to John Locke, it was clear that the support of slavery is no anomaly. Locke may have inveighed against the arguments of Grotius, but he also observes that in a state of war, slaves are those "who being captives taken in a just war, are by the right of nature subjected to the absolute dominion and arbitrary power of their masters" (Locke [1691] 2003: II.85). Tellingly, Locke goes on to point out that, having "forfeited their lives, and with it their liberties," they "cannot in that state be considered as any part of civil society." Why? Because they do not have private property, which for Locke is the definition of freedom. In other words, not only is freedom restricted to those within the bounds of "civil society," but one's membership thereof depends on the ownership of private property. A careful reading of the *Two Treatises* and other works reveals that this champion of liberty excluded large swathes of humanity from the closed community of the free: apart from captives in war, there are children, indigenous peoples, the Irish, Roman Catholics, and even much of continental Europe (Boer and Petterson 2014: 44–47).

It should be no surprise that the American *Declaration of Independence*, let alone *The Constitution*, should partake of this systemic exclusion in the name of "freedom." Not only were the original authors of the documents – Thomas Jefferson and James Madison – slave-owners, but also in 32 of the first 36 years of the existence of the United States, slave-owners from Virginia occupied the post of president. Obviously, the "all men" of the Declaration offers a very restrictive sense of who counts as part of the "all": slaves were clearly excluded, but so also women, indigenous peoples, and in fact most of the world. Losurdo (2011: 25–26; 2014: 29) identifies a trace also in the constitution, where we find in the first article a distinction between "free persons" and "all other persons," who were obviously not free.

In light of all this, how could the proponents of liberalism maintain that they sought freedom from despotism? The recent histories of the three countries provides an answer: with the Dutch Revolution, or "80 years war" (1568–1648), the Glorious Revolution in England (1688), and the American War of Independence (1775–1883), they all felt that they were ridding themselves of an external despotic yoke – Spain, the Roman Catholic Church, and British colonialism. Yet, in the

very act of dispensing with such despotism, they systematically enacted another and even more vicious form.

In light of these points, the seminar participants returned to the subtitle of Losurdo's book: "A Counter-History" – Italian "Controistoria." The Chinese translation is "*pipan shi*," a "critical history," which does not bear the same meaning as "counter." But what does "counter" mean? After testing various possibilities, we agreed with a more expansive definition that derived from part of Marx's agenda in *Capital*, which was to identify the obfuscations and indeed false consciousness of classical economists in order to develop an argument for the inner working of capital itself. So also with the ideologues of liberalism.

Class Consciousness

The discussion was even more extensive on the question of liberalism as a form of class consciousness. Indeed, our initial run through the material was relatively swift, so after the seminar in question I undertook some further work concerning the details of Losurdo's arguments (2011: 241–244; 2014: 263–267), and we returned to the question at the next seminar. The catch with the various values espoused by liberalism is that they seem attractive enough on their own: liberal, generous, dispassionate, decent, respectable, well-born, wealthy, and educated in the liberal arts and sciences. Does not everyone want to be at least decent, respectable and well-educated?

Some of these terms are particularly difficult to translate, not necessarily because of their immediate senses but because of the rich semantic fields they invoke. For example, we discussed the rendering of "decent" as *zhengpai*, which also in Chinese bears the senses of upright and honest. Further, "respectable" needs a fuller expression, as *zhide zunjing he timian de*, which may best be rendered as "worthy of respect and honour." In other words, it is the impression made on others, from whom one gains such respect and honour – best captured with *timian*, which bears the senses of "face," "dignity" and "propriety." One final example: "liberal arts and sciences" is not translated with the usual term for "liberal" (*ziyou*) but with a term loaded with millennia of Chinese culture: *shenshi*. Originally, *shen* meant the girdle worn by officials in the imperial service, as also by scholars and literary men. Here we have a glimpse of the fact that for much of China's history the state and its elaborately efficient bureaucracy determined one's social status. The common translation of *shenshi* is "gentleman," and while there are some overlaps, the semantic field of the English term indicates a different history and perception. Thus, "liberal arts and sciences"

becomes in a Chinese framework the education one used to receive in China from preparing for imperial service examinations and then a long career in such a service. It is far from the “liberal” of the English term.

The key for liberalism as a form of class consciousness is not so much that the bourgeoisie had to borrow values – since it had few of its own – from aristocratic and conservative traditions (especially well-born and noble, decent and respectable), but that they were collated in terms of a class opposition. Thus, the opposite of “liberal” was “servile,” which was characteristic of those who had to work for a living. These were the plebeian “mechanics” and others, the vulgar and subaltern classes, who should certainly not be entrusted with the reins of power. After all, they had not the wealth or leisure to undertake the crucial “liberal arts and sciences.” The seminar participants immediately understood this point, since it is part of Marxist analysis that class consciousness comes into its own when there is a class enemy.

Managing the Contradiction

It is a core feature of Chinese Marxism that one needs to identify the primary contradiction among many contradictions and tackle it directly. As a result, the secondary contradictions too can be resolved. This approach derives from Mao Zedong’s crucial text, “On Contradiction” ([1937] 1965), which was a significant step in developing Marxist dialectics in light of the long philosophical history in China concerning contradictions. Today, contradiction analysis remains at the core of Chinese political, economic and social life – from an individual’s everyday life to the identification of principal contradiction for China as whole (Xi 2017: 9–10).⁶

With this in mind, we tackled Losurdo’s analysis of the way liberalism never targeted its principal contradiction – the inseparable and constitutive connection with unfreedom. If its ideologues did so, they would realise the emptiness of the whole worldview and arrive at Lenin’s assessment:

All your talk about freedom is sheer claptrap, parrot phrases, fashionable twaddle, or hypocrisy. It is just a painted signboard. And you yourselves are whited sepulchres. You are mean-spirited boors, and your education, culture,

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6. In this major speech at the CPC’s nineteenth congress, Xi Jinping identified a new primary contradiction in China, the first shift in many decades: “the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life.” The speech would become the basis for Xi Jinping Thought for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era.

and enlightenment are only a species of thoroughgoing prostitution (Lenin [1907] 1963: 53).

The seminar participants enjoyed this quotation from Lenin, not merely because they know his work well, but also because of the way he pinpoints exactly what is at stake (see also Losurdo 2007).

The futile efforts to deal with this principal contradiction appeared in terms of mutual criticism (with the United States and Britain accusing each other of hypocrisy over slavery); externalisation (to the colonies and elsewhere⁷); and through a constant process of emancipation and dis-emancipation. For example, as slavery was slowly abolished, in England there was a rapid growth of poor-houses, the practices of press-ganging into the armed forces, transport of convicts to the colonies, the spread of indentured servants, kidnapping of children to work in factories, and a whole new sub-class of working poor. In the United States, the so-called “Progressive Age” that began in the late nineteenth century and saw many democratic reforms (direct election to the Senate, extension of the right to vote to women, secret ballot and so on) was also the time when Ku Klux Klan terrorist squads ran rampant, African-Americans were systemically disenfranchised from voting, and when indigenous peoples lost their residual lands and were subjected to “assimilation.”

There was particular interest in the way this constant process of finding new groups to exclude from the domain of “liberty” has been internationalised in terms of “pariah” or “rogue” states (Losurdo 2007: 246). Originally used for recaptured run-away indentured white semi-slaves (who were branded with an “R”), the term has come to be used internationally for any state that the United States deems against its own interests. Practices used by such a proponent of “*Herren-volk* democracy” include tariffs, sanctions (the modern equivalent of the siege or concentration camp) and – where possible – bombing and invasion. All too familiar with the United States’ latest efforts in this regard, from North Korea and Venezuela to the failing effort to thwart China’s path, one participant exclaimed: “It is the United States that is a rogue state.” Another asked, practically, about what it could do militarily. In response, I related a recent assessment from a Russian military

7. An excellent example is the 1772 legal case of James Somersett, a slave who took his master to court. The court ruled that a slave could not be forcibly removed from England, where there was no legal basis for slavery. In the colonies, of course, other laws applied. Losurdo writes (2011: 48; 2014: 54): “Somerset’s master was held responsible for an assault on the purity of the land of the free, who could not tolerate being confused and mixed up with slaves, rather than a violation of the liberty and dignity of a human being.”

expert on China's military technology: overall, China is at least four years in advance of the United States (Kashin 2019).

A question remains: if liberalism turns out to be determined by a constitutive unfreedom, by a small community of the free and its dictatorship over those deemed unworthy of freedom, where is real freedom to be found? For Losurdo the answer is clear: in the struggles for national liberation from colonial oppression around the world. A favoured example comes from Latin America, especially the Haitian revolution that then spurred Simon Bolivar's leadership in liberating the whole of South America. But it is also found in the communist movement, which is closely enmeshed with anti-colonial struggles. This is of course the Chinese experience, in which the communist revolution is simply called the Liberation.

Rediscovering Hegel

The second half of the seminar series focused on *Hegel and the Freedom of the Moderns*. For some time now, I have gained the impression that Hegel is understood better in China than in Europe, not least because of the long tradition of Chinese dialectics. It helps that Mao observed in 1965 – after 40 years of studying Hegel – that one should always read Hegel (Tian 2005: 146).⁸ So it should come as no surprise that one of the first books by Losurdo to be published in Chinese concerns Hegel. In the seminars, we focused on three main features: the state; material rights; and revolution.

From Children's Tutor to the State

The first concerned a concrete beginning to provide a perspective of Hegel's view of the state. Losurdo emphasises that Hegel did not come from an old Junker family, but had to begin his intellectual life in the humiliating role of being a private tutor to children of such a family. Indeed, this was the experience of a string of philosophers, from Kant to Hegel. While their days were taken up with the mundane and under-paid tasks of teaching aristocratic children who looked down on their tutors, their long evenings were spent in efforts to complete manuscripts so as to make a little extra money. Indeed, the fabled *Science of Logic* was one such project by Hegel, although it ended up taking somewhat longer than expected.

8. Tian Chenshan (2005: 62–86) provides a useful survey of the early and extensive engagement with Hegel in China.

The point of beginning here is best expressed by the following: “What re-emerges here is the figure of the civil servant, the intellectual who, instead of identifying culture with *schöle*, identifies it with labor. Hegel becomes the symbol of the banausic, plebeian intellectual, and indeed, in one of his letters, he did not hesitate to claim that his ‘occupation’, his ‘bread and water’, was the study and teaching of philosophy” (Losurdo 2004: 147–148; 2008c: 189). This experience certainly did not endear such private education to Hegel. Thus, as a later headmaster of a gymnasium, he began advocating for public education as a far better system. Why? It would ensure a more all-rounded development of “ethical character” in the passage from family to civil society. In China, this is hardly a remarkable argument, for the excellence of its modern education system dates back to the time of Mao Zedong and is now undergoing comprehensive enhancement in quality and innovation – from remote rural schools to top universities. But what did surprise the seminar participants was the fact that Hegel’s position was still quite controversial at the time. He was criticised for undermining the rights of parents to determine whether their children went to school or not, whether they would begin work at a young age or simply stay at home. For example, the baron Wilhelm von Humboldt – founder of the University of Berlin that was later renamed after him and his brother – opined that the state’s authority should be restricted and that “public education, imposed or directed by the State” is suspicious and worrisome. Indeed, any state that mandates education exceeds its authority (Losurdo 2004: 204; 2008c: 268; see Humboldt [1792] 1969: 51–52).

All very well: Hegel, especially with his championing of the rights of children above their parents, was ahead of his time. Compulsory education for all was a position he maintained throughout his life,⁹ as well as his opposition to child labour and slavery, but the point of this experiential and even biographical focus on Hegel’s life provides a unique angle on his celebration of the state. Of course, I was keen to bring out this aspect in light of the crucial role of the state, and indeed the CPC, in the process of building the New China (Zhang 2016, 2017). Here indeed, Hegel through Marx can provide an intriguing wider rationale for a strong socialist state.

Hegel’s material on the state is well known, especially from *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*: the state has a well-nigh

9. The clearest statement, which Losurdo quotes on a couple of occasions, appears in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel [1818–1831] 1974: vol. 4, 602–603; see also Hegel [1821] 1989: para. 239; [1821] 2003: para. 239).

transcendent form that precedes its historical manifestations; it provides the crucial cohesion of a *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, which arises with the bourgeois state and threatens to tear every piece of social fabric asunder; it provides the ethical framework for society; it subordinates the individual to a greater whole and indeed a greater good. This complex presentation has seen Hegel accused of being a reactionary supporter of the Restoration in Germany, of being an idealist with theological traces who attempted to make flesh-and-blood human beings fit into his ideal state (so Marx), of being a secret liberal and thus the founder of the constitutional state (although he was forced to censor himself). None of these simple labels can be applied to Hegel, argues Losurdo, for we need to follow Hegel's own method and situate every thought and action in its concrete historical situation (again, an observation that resonates deeply in the seminar).

Losurdo emphasises the following:

- 1 The state must always act to limit the excesses of any market economy, especially the "right of contract" that justifies all types of exploitation, including that of children (Losurdo 2004: 69; 2008c: 88).
- 2 The individual is not challenged or limited by the state, nor engaged in the *bellum omnium contra omnes* of the State of Nature. Rather: "if the formation of the modern State means subjecting the individual to an objective legal mandate, at the same time it affirms and defends the individual's actual value" (Losurdo 2004: 78; 2008c: 100).
- 3 The state's task is not to secure private property (a favoured liberal position), but to secure inalienable rights that are primarily material rights (Losurdo 2004: 69; 2008c: 88).

The Primacy of Material Rights

This final point was arguably one of the most central to the whole seminar series, especially since we were all very conscious of the way the Western European liberal tradition – with its emphasis on civil and political rights – has been used in efforts to irritate and denigrate China.

We began this discussion with another concrete example: the starving person. Losurdo quotes from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right*:

A man who is starving has the absolute right to violate another person's property, since he is violating property only in a limited fashion: the right of necessity [*Notrecht*]¹⁰ requires him not to violate another person's right as such: he is

only interested in a piece of bread, he is not treating the other person as an individual without rights. Abstract intellect is prone to consider any legal violation as absolute, but a starving man only violates the particular, he does not violate right *per se* (Hegel [1818–1831] 1974: vol. 4, 341; quoted in Losurdo 2004: 155; 2008c: 203–204).

In this case, the right to property is clearly limited (a distinct challenge to many liberal assertions), while the right of a person in absolute and life-threatening need is an absolute right. The twist is that this right does not violate the other person's right as such, but only the fact that this other person has a piece of bread.

In this respect, the starving person draws right to and is equated with the slave, whose right to freedom overcomes any specific right over property. One has the "absolute right" to freedom from hunger, while the other has the "absolute right" to freedom itself (Hegel [1818–1831] 1974: vol. 3, 251). The point Losurdo seeks to develop – and one that resonated deeply with the Chinese Marxist approach to human rights – is that this is a *material right* (Hegel [1818–1831] 1986: 109). This distinct focus on rights takes on greater clarity with the rights to self-preservation, subsistence, work, as well as the right to socio-economic wellbeing. As "positive rights" they all embody what Hegel means by the "right to life."

On a couple of occasions, Losurdo mentions that these new categories are ignored or fundamentally unknown in the liberal tradition (Losurdo 2004: 89, 186; 2008c: 113, 243). This point entailed extensive discussion, since we were all very aware of the aggressive use of civil and political rights from the Western liberal tradition to intervene in former colonised and semi-colonies countries like China. Indeed, this tradition bases itself on the right to, and mastery over, private property. The two terms, *ius* and *dominium*, ultimately derive via a complicated path from the Roman invention of private property in response to the economic centrality of slavery (Tierney 1997; Kilcullen 2011; Boer *in press*). Upon this basis are built the core civil and political rights, which consistently ignore or at least relegate to second place material rights. In the seminar, I used this diagram to illustrate, noting the outcome of this liberal tradition in "identity politics."

By contrast, the tradition identified by Losurdo and beginning with Hegel at least follows a different path, in which material rights come to the forefront. This would later, with anti-colonial struggles for national

10. Understood as the "right of extreme need," *Notrecht* in Hegel undergoes a significant reinterpretation of the old *ius necessitatis*. Even for Kant, this was a right outside the law, in a state of nature; for Hegel, it was a right within society, within the state.

Western liberal tradition

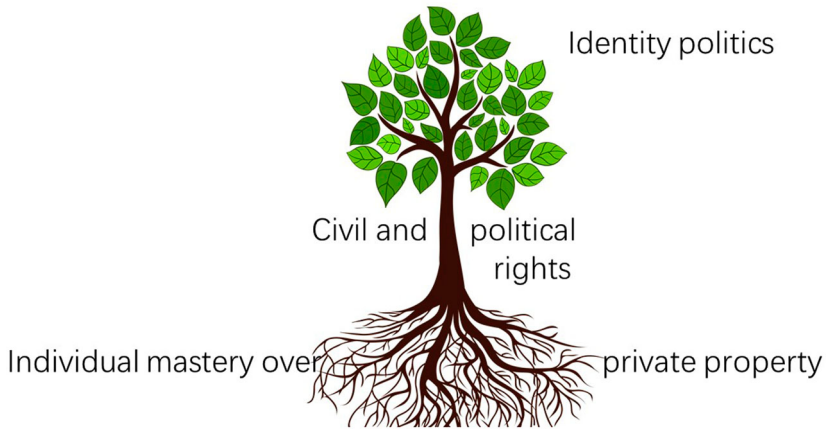


Figure 1.

liberation already championed by Marx and Engels as part of the global class struggle (Losurdo 2016: 7-52), find its foundation on a thorough reinterpretation of sovereignty as the right to non-interference by other states. While a necessary basis, this anti-colonial sovereignty is

Hegel -> Marx and Chinese Tradition

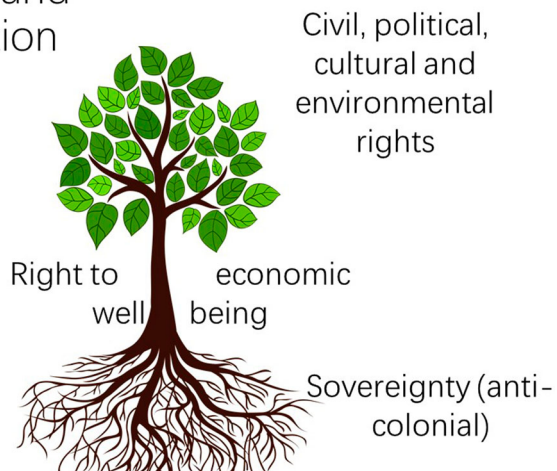


Figure 2.

not determinative of the core right to socio-economic wellbeing. From this main right other rights – civil, political, environmental and cultural rights – become possible.

Neither the seminar participants nor I were previously aware that this tradition arises in Hegel, so this was a real discovery. That it meshes in unexpected ways with traditional Chinese assumptions, only to be enhanced and reinterpreted in light of Marxism, makes it a powerful tradition indeed (Sun 2014; Wan 2017). It may be seen, as I have proposed elsewhere, as a “rooted universal,” which always recognises its specific origins and context. Only in this way can it contribute to the genuine universal of human rights. The same obviously applies to the Western tradition, as long as it recognises its specific context and origins.¹¹

Revolutions are the Locomotives of History

Was Hegel, then, a revolutionary? Losurdo writes (2004: 99; 2008c: 127): “In short, every revolution in the history of humanity was supported and celebrated by Hegel, despite his reputation as an incorrigible defender of the established order.” From the plebeian uprising against the patricians in ancient Rome to the struggle for independence among the Spanish colonies in Latin America, Hegel gave his support – albeit at times somewhat qualified. Let us consider a couple of examples.

A more obvious example is the blunt description of the Spanish colonies:

The Spanish took possession of South America in order to dominate it and to enrich themselves both through political office and by exacting tributes from the natives. Living far away from the mother country on which they depended, they had more scope to indulge their arbitrary inclinations; and by force, adroitness, and self-confidence they gained a great preponderance over the Indians. The noble and magnanimous aspects of the Spanish character did not accompany them to America. (Hegel 1955: 205; 1975: 167)

Even more, the Indigenous peoples had been “been subjected to far greater violence, and employed in gruelling labours to which their strength was scarcely equal,” leading to “recent efforts of the Americans

11. On this point, the two covenants on human rights from the United Nations, along with the *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples* (initially sponsored by the Soviet Union) are pertinent (United Nations 1960, 1966a, 1966b).

to create independent states" (Hegel 1955: 201; 1975: 164). Losurdo (2004: 99; 2008c: 128) is keen to see these as indications of Hegel's support for such efforts at independence, but we should be a little wary, for Hegel couches these observations within a general "state of nature" argument. This entails an inferiority in Latin America, all the way from geography through animals to human beings. These moves to independence may be found, Hegel observes, among the "creole" population.

Losurdo is on better ground when he returns to the question of the starving person and the poor in general. Although Hegel at times seems to limit *Notrecht* to a temporary inner rebellion, he also observes in the more forthright *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right* that "extreme need [Not] no longer has this temporary character" in developed *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (Hegel [1819–1820] 1983: 196). Why? As capitalism develops, "wealth and poverty increase simultaneously" (Hegel [1819–1820] 1983: 193), leading to a situation where the absolute right to take food and rebel are well-nigh permanent. Ultimately, for Hegel the core reason for celebrating revolutions, even with qualifications, is that they embody the struggle for recognition and the difficult unfolding of a universal human subject. Since the starving person, like the slave, is denied all – material – rights, then this person cannot belong to universal category of the human subject (Losurdo 2004: 305; 2008c: 396).

As one participant observed: "Hegel draws closer to Marx." But a couple of questions remain: is not Hegel the one who infamously wrote in the preface to *The Philosophy of Right*, "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational" (Hegel [1821] 2003: 20; [1821] 1989: 24)? And was he not in the same text the great champion of gradualness? In answer to the first question, Losurdo enlists Engels and Lenin, especially in reply to all the liberals and conservatives who have castigated Hegel over this assertion. Engels writes:

Now, according to Hegel, reality is, however, in no way an attribute predicable of any given state of affairs, social or political, in all circumstances and at all times. On the contrary. The Roman Republic was real, but so was the Roman Empire which superseded it. In 1789 the French monarchy had become so unreal, that is to say, so robbed of all necessity, so irrational, that it had to be destroyed by the Great Revolution, of which Hegel always speaks with the greatest enthusiasm. In this case, therefore, the monarchy was the unreal and the revolution the real. And so, in the course of development, all that was previously real becomes unreal, loses its necessity, its right of existence, its rationality. And in the place of moribund reality comes a new, viable reality (Engels [1886] 1990, 358; [1886] 2011, 125).

If Hegel's statement was good enough for one revolutionary, it was even better for another. A version of the phrase caught Lenin's eye in 1914–1915 when reading Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: "what is real is rational," he notes in the margin (Lenin [1915] 1968a: 280). Then in response to *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, he notes twice that "reason governs the world" (Lenin [1915] 1968b: 306; see Losurdo 2004: 34–35; 2008c: 47). Why would Lenin, of all revolutionaries, find this important? Is it because Hegel elsewhere stresses the dynamic, forward-moving nature of his observation: "what is actual becomes rational, and the rational becomes actual" (Hegel [1819–1820] 1983: 51)?

It is more because Lenin, as he works deeper into Hegel, rediscovers the ruptural nature of the dialectic. One is not merely determined by objective conditions, for revolutionary intervention can change those very conditions (Boer 2017). Here we find the answer to Lenin's enthusiasm for Hegel's "leaps," especially in *The Science of Logic*. "Leaps! Breaks in gradualness. Leaps! Leaps!" (Lenin [1914] 1968: 123), or in "On the Question of Dialectics," leaps to "the 'break in continuity', to the 'transformation into the opposite', to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new" (Lenin [1915] 1968c: 358).

How does this have a bearing on the relation between revolution and reform in China? We thought here mostly of the Reform and Opening Up, which is at times described as another great revolution. Perhaps Lenin can be our guide, particularly in his struggles with the Western European socialists who began retreating from revolutionary action and preferred to work for reform within the structures of the bourgeois state. For Lenin, the opposition between reform and revolution is false. Instead, he points out that it is "either revolutionary class struggle, of which reforms are *always* a by-product (when the revolution is not completely successful) or no reforms at all" (Lenin [1917] 1964: 213). At this point, Lenin is still looking forward to the proletarian revolution, but even here reforms are framed as a by-product of revolution. What happens after the revolution? The same applies, for reforms become even more important for the sake of reshaping the economy, governance, social structures and even culture. In short, reforms are needed for the long-term construction of socialism.

Conclusion

Obviously, all of the seminar participants found the material by Losurdo deeply interesting. A tell-tale sign of their interest was that

all mobile phones remained closed during the seminars, to be opened only during the short breaks. From unearthing the constitutive unfreedom of liberalism to the primacy of material rights in Hegel, they were always engaged, debating most points at length and in-depth. As I mentioned earlier, I focused on these questions precisely because I had become aware of their importance in China.

In conclusion, let me ask: what does the experience in the seminars indicate about the level of Marxist theoretical knowledge in the CPC? All of the participants are members of the CPC, of which they are proud once again. Why once again? A decade or so ago, when I was engaged in China, I would frequently meet party members and at times ask them: what do you think of the party? The general response was that they were ashamed, even though China's overall situation had improved dramatically. They were ashamed for many reasons, whether the corruption, the lack of knowledge of Marxism by many cadres and leaders, the loss of touch with and respect by the masses, or the fact that core communist values had been discarded. How different the situation is now, although not without some serious hard work during Xi Jinping's tenure as general secretary. This labour includes the most thoroughgoing and effective anti-corruption campaign since Mao Zedong, a campaign that has now shifted to fostering core socialist values, the focus on eschewing personal gain and serving the common good, and leading the struggle to achieve not merely a moderately well-off (*xiaokang*) society but a strong socialistically modernised society. Of particular interest are the frequent compulsory party-building sessions for all members, monthly study sessions of core texts, regular refresher courses at one of the many party schools, the emphasis on restoring trust or faith in Marxism – all with the result not of a weariness of such processes, but a clear thirst for even more knowledge. The seminar series bore this emphasis out in spades: increased knowledge of the complex issues in Marxist philosophy, history and economics; an urge to tell China's Marxist story well to the rest of the world; and an eagerness to engage with foreigners, especially those keen to listen, understand and engage in constructive debate.

Above all, they seem rejuvenated through the clear reiteration that Marxism really is the core of the Chinese project, from economics, through culture, and to philosophy itself. They are very conscious that the CPC's achievements in the last 70 years have been immense, but they are also very clear that many problems remain and need to be addressed. It is not for nothing that the best students now seek to study Marxism in one of its many sub-branches, where a decade or so ago they preferred economics. Xi Jinping has much to do with this

turn of fortunes in the CPC, so it should be no surprise that the common people, the *laobaixing*, see him as “*bucuo*” – “not bad.” Or, as they like to say, “do not forget your original desire; keep the mission firmly in mind.”

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